Annie, the Kitchen Queen

By Charlotte Johnstone

When Annie Jorgenson died last week, Forbearance Church lost almost the last person around who could operate the kitchen's venerable and massive gas stove without blowing the place to kingdom come. Even in her 70s, Annie was the undisputed ruler of Forbearance's kitchen, and most of the congregation couldn't remember a time when that wasn't so.

You see, Annie had been the church's reigning cook for nearly 40 years and almost nothing happened in the church kitchen without her approval. Oh, it didn't start out that way, to be sure—she hadn't intended to become such a "presence," but that's the way it ended up.

At first, when she was in her early 30s, she had merely agreed to run Forbearance's Hospitality Committee, responsible for an occasional coffee hour or two. The way it worked out, though, was that Annie held that position for 10 years, mostly because no one else wanted the job. And somewhere during those 10 years, the hospitality business at Forbearance began to suffer from "job creep"—coffee hours with pastries every Sunday, requests for funeral visitation food and drink, wedding receptions that would have been awkward to refuse, regular church dinners, Woman's Association luncheons, pancake suppers and Lenten breakfasts. As you can imagine, in short order Annie became the person to see if you wanted food at Forbearance, which was, if truth be told, pretty much the way it worked for Annie at home, too—another thing she didn't exactly plan.

Annie and Edgar are the parents of nine children, who have, in turn, produced 23 grandchildren. Annie figures that over the past 40 years, she's cooked about 43,800 meals, give or take a few, and that's just at home, never mind for the moment about the church. With 11 people at most meals, that's a lot of chewing for someone who, strangely enough, entered marriage not understanding even the concept of Jello. The fact is that Edgar and she had their children so fast that before Annie had a chance to learn the finer points of culinary expertise, she was already to the "fill 'em up and move 'em out" stage. Big bowls of stuff—giant platters of vittles for mouths programmed, seemingly in-utero, to say "more, please."

As a result, what Annie understood best was any recipe that could be cooked in a vat. She specialized in huge steel bowls, 9"x-13" pans, expansive griddles and oversized frying pans. And, even then, the meals never seemed to come to an end—people would stand up and leave the table, but apparently that was only so they could lean against the open refrigerator door asking, "So, what else is there to eat?" Annie figured that if the meal hadn't been vat-size in the first place, they'd just be standing there sooner.

Anyway, before Annie had time to think about it, she was a self-taught expert in satisfying the hunger of large numbers of people, a skill that didn't go unnoticed at Forbearance Church when the congregation grew large enough to offer her a modest salary to continue as a sort of "chef de cuisine," a title, incidentally, that Annie would never have used.

Forbearance's kitchen became Annie's exclusive domain and there she reigned in a kind of benevolent dictatorship—jolly, opinionated, unflappable, territorial. She moved fast and efficiently and any members assisting her could expect to stir, knead, beat, stuff and carve as if someone's life depended on it. For many members, it would be the only time they would work up an actual sweat in a kitchen. For Annie, steamed-up windows and steamed-up people were merely signs that progress was being made.

Annie's cooking, she would be the first to acknowledge, had never been fancy and she wasn't particularly attentive to what is now called "presentation." As far as she was concerned, if her meals covered the basic food groups and there was enough for seconds, then that ought to be good enough for anyone, thank you very much. She was, in short, an old-style cook who believed in the salutary virtues of gravies, real butter and cream, good red beef, lots of cheese and piles of noodles, which, by the way, she never learned to call "pasta."

The only recipes she ever used, when she bothered with them at all, were her mother's from Fanny Farmer's original and now politically incorrect kitchen.

She cooked what she already knew and felt comfortable with and was quite incurious about new trends or cross-cultural experiences in fine dining. She didn't view food as an extension of her personality or as a lofty aesthetic expression. She saw it as fuel, plain and simple—the stuff you need to get you going so you can do the things that need to be done—and nothing made her happier or feel more needed than to see a big table of her food surrounded by people enjoying what she had to offer.

She was a traditionalist when it came to church suppers and apparently what looked properly Presbyterian to her were menus featuring things like sliced ham with raisin sauce, scalloped potatoes, green bean casseroles, turkey with stuffing, mashed potatoes, candied yams, tossed salads, chicken and gravy with dumplings, Jello with whipped cream, sheet cakes, tons of pies, oceans of sugar cookies. Good solid food, "comfort food" she called it, washed down by strong coffee. The church dining hall became a popular place and Annie presided over it all as the uncontested Kitchen Queen of Forbearance.

However, all that started to change about 10 years ago when the avalanche of advice from the food police started to seep into everyone's collective consciousness. Slowly, questions began to be raised in nutritionally alarmed brains about the wisdom of Annie's menus—too much fat, not enough fiber, too much sugar and too many trans-fatty acids, dangerous additives and the use of processed ingredients. People started getting finicky. "Doctor's orders," they'd say. "Clogs the arteries," they'd warn. "Gotta lose all this weight," they'd plead. Annie responded by posting a big sign in the dining hall: "Food eaten within church walls has no calories and God does not like leftovers!" and, while everyone laughed, it didn't seem to help much.

Having dwelt in Forbearance's House of Cholesterol for nearly all their lives, everyone, it seemed, particularly the younger members, were decamping for the greener pastures of sprouts, lentils and garbanzo beans, where they seemed to think they would live forever. Annie, who would have agreed with Mark Twain that "To eat is human; to digest divine," found it all quite puzzling. But it wasn't until people began suggesting alternative menus involving food she'd never heard of—tabouleh, black bean casserole, tofu lasagna, yogurt-clove cake, spinach-lentil hot dish, carob brownies, assorted mineral waters and soy milk—that she began to understand that her culinary day may have passed.

She began to consider retirement, finally packing up her personal utensils when someone tried to convince her to mold a turkey out of soy-pumpkin mash. The younger members said they were willing to take over, so she promised to teach them the eccentricities of the church stove and where to plug in the coffee urns so the fuses wouldn't blow and, after suitable ceremony and thanks from everyone, she went home to cook for her great-grandchildren, especially the younger ones. They still loved big heaps of food, particularly gravy lakes in mashed potatoes, and they loved to help stir anything in a vat and she figured she'd be dead by the time they wised up to current nutritional guidance. And, as it turned out to everyone's sorrow, she was right.

To provide a fitting send-off for Annie following her funeral at Forbearance, a potluck luncheon was held. Bring what you can, everyone was told. And it came to pass that without consulting one another, all the Forbearance members who attended arrived with "Annie food"—ham with raisin sauce, buttered potatoes, turkey with gravy, Jello with whipped cream, noodles with cream sauce, cakes, pies, and coffee strong enough to keep them all awake for a week. There was enough for all to have seconds and no one mentioned arteries, cholesterol, digestive troubles or weight.

It was, as Annie would have said, "a meal to put meat on your bones" and Edgar and the nine children and all the grandchildren and the great-grandchildren gave the cooks all the thanks they needed when they were told that Annie would have felt right at home.

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